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UNCLAS HANOI 000396

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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV

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SUBJECT: "PROTESTING" FOR PEACE IN IRAQ

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1. (U) According to press reports, over 1,300 people turned up for a rally at Hanoi's downtown Cultural and Friendship Hall (a gift from the then-Soviet Union) on February 18 to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Iraq, express opposition to war and embargoes against Iraq, and to call for a "political solution" in accordance with the UN Charter, international law, and national independence and sovereignty. (Reftel carries text of the resolution passed at the meeting, which received extensive media coverage.) Organizers included the Vietnam Fatherland Front (a Communist Party of Vietnam organization), the Vietnam Peace Committee, the Vietnam-Iraq Friendship Association, and the Vietnam Committee for Solidarity and Cooperation with Asian, Africa, and Latin American People. Representatives from veterans, religious, workers, intellectuals, ethnic minorities, and other groups reportedly attended.

2. (U) Several speakers highlighted Vietnam's own experiences as victim of war in sparking the "deep sympathy" of the Vietnamese people toward the Iraqi people and the desire to avoid further disruption to Iraqi lives. The Secretary General of the Vietnam Fatherland Front lamented

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"strengthened military pressure" by the U.S., UK, and Australia and against Iraq, and expressed worry about these "threats to the peace and stability of the world." Another speaker claimed war against Iraq would "violate international law and principle." Another speaker noted that even many people in the U.S. and UK sought peace and opposed a war in Iraq. Another noted that "U.S. and UK authorities should not proceed with a war against Iraq . . . and should avoid causing additional hardships" for the people of Iraq.

3. (U) Septel will report on a similar meeting organized in Ho Chi Minh City on February 18, which also received extensive media coverage.

4. (U) Comment: Events like these are carefully staged by the CPV's "mass organizations" only after blessing from senior CPV officials, and do not necessarily reflect genuine popular opinion. Nonetheless, the negative media coverage of the U.S. build-up in the Gulf region and our diplomatic efforts, the prominent coverage given recently to international anti-war protests, and the media sympathy expressed repeatedly for the Iraqi people have likely succeeded in raising public distrust of U.S. intentions and opposition to military action against one of Vietnam's "traditional friends." Neither the CPV or GVN would be willing to permit spontaneous public demonstrations, however; they would view this as a threat to social stability and public order. It is not improbable that these same mass organizations will be permitted, encouraged, or instructed to stage street protests near U.S. diplomatic facilities after the outset of any military campaign in Iraq, although authorities will be careful not to let them get out of control.

BURGHARDT